

Let's talk Pre-shot

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What is it, really? How did it get started? Where did it get off-track? Or maybe you think it's very much ON-track. How important is it? Is there a right way or a wrong way to go about it? We've all likely asked such questions. And we've all just as likely developed some kind of mind-set in that connection.

So what about it? Pre-shot, first of all comes fully, totally and completely before any movement toward a shot takes place. No, that's not the way most players do it, but that's how it shapes up. That is, if you believe in research and findings that are based in studied principle. If you just want an opinion, you can stop here and go back to yours and other's "guesstimates."

If you review what you have heard about "pre-shot routine" and what you may have read about it, perhaps you have noticed the common elements in what is being said.

Essentially, the stated "gospel" is "Every good player has one," and if you want to be a good player, you should have one, too. What is offered as a process is always the same. It is generally includes several basic notions: determine the shot you want, select your club, check conditions, focus on the target, and align yourself properly.

Curiously, the "gospel" insists that this procedure will also "control" anxiety.

Sounds pretty good, mostly because it's been said so much that it is bound to sound familiar and we often use "familiarity" as the only "proof" we need. If it sounds OK, it must be right.

Step out of the box for a moment. Think about it in a slightly different way. Call it pre-shot planning, for instance, with the only "routine" being that it accompanies every shot. It is important, but not for the reasons implied in most literature. Every action we take that has any semblance of intention in it deserves a plan. You might get in your car for a totally aimless drive, but usually, you have a destination in mind. You just don't stand around and contemplate it, nor do you focus your attention on the lines on the road way while you head for your "target." You learned many moons ago so that you have driving habits that keep the car in the road without having to think about steering.

If you must check your alignment after you get to the ball, you have no chance of playing the shot automatically. Even if you shifted gears before checking your alignment, that insertion will undo the necessary transition required to go from pre-shot planning to automatic, and you will be back on manual in the blink of an eye. Once your brain has the intended message about alignment, if you have developed a sound alignment habit (an imperative in the game) you can begin your approach to the golf ball with confidence because this information has now been transferred from your conscious, declarative memory to your non conscious memory where all your actions are stored. That means that you can step into your alignment with the same confidence that guides your toothbrush to your teeth.

You will not need to fiddle with your feet and shoulders. If you have developed a sound alignment habit, you will walk into your alignment in good shape. If you have to check it after you get there, not only will you be surrendering your game to the manual (mechanical) process, but you will need to recognize that as your prime clue that you have no habit built at that point.

Pre-shot routine tends to be garbled since it lacks clear definition and its useful functions are often overlooked. Statements about it may seem clear, but when you look closely, they tend to confuse mental issues with the mechanical and that presents problems.

First. “Pre” means “before.” Players are consistently instructed that pre-shot is everything that happens up until the club is drawn back. A few even insist that pre-shot also embraces a period of evaluation after the swing is made.

Why all that confusion? Upon examination of the reasons for “pre-shot” in the first place, what is clear is that almost all teachers and players know we need to “plan” for a particular shot. What is usually being done, however, is very subtle – it pretends to plan, but really is an attempt to settle down an anxious system, to mitigate nervousness, to calm the nerves – without admitting to the condition. So it is, in technical terms, emotional displacement. We don't need to consider anything that may be “bad,” but we do need to be aware if we would get on to what really needs to happen in pre-shot.

If you don't know how to play, pre-shot may look like a mini-practice session. If you do know how to play, then pre-shot need be no more than picking your goal (target) and your weapon (club). If you have no habits for gripping the club, set-up (posture), alignment, and takeaway, you may be in trouble already.

If you have developed sound swing habits, you need not get into the self-instruction business during pre-shot. You just need to decide where you want to go. The “how” to get there is already in place in your habits. If not. Go back to the drawing board (after your game).

The only thing “routine” about pre-shot, in reality, is that there is one before each shot. Pre-shot is a time frame, not an activity. We should call it “Routine Decision time.” It got to be something else, quite innocently, but out of desperation to find some way – any way – to settle the nerves, quiet the mind, ease the tension. When that didn't work, everyone got more and more serious about how precise pre-shot should be, to a point that it became a designed ritual. In other words, no one wanted to own up to either the desperation or the inability to manage anxiety, so the ritual simply fell into place. Without being too clinical, one must study enough to recognize that any ritualistic activity is simply a “makeshift” way of attempting to slow down anxiety and its effects. (Footnotes from research are available, if you want them).

Having said that, here is a recommendation for “pre-shot.” It is assumed that you have learned some things about your game and that you have developed some habits – good or bad. On the course, the best scenario is to go with whatever habits you have and work on the rest after you have finished your round.

Before each shot, take a look at where you want to go, take into consideration the path, and any unusual factors like wind, water, sand, distance. Then pick your club and give your system ONE dress-rehearsal demonstration of the swing you wish to make. (More than one rehearsal swing creates multiple commands to one's non discriminatory, non conscious system. It can only respond to one at a time. If you make two, it doesn't know which one you want, so it may try both or neither). Then start your clear key as you walk to your set-up position. Once you start your walk, accompanied by your clear key, staying on automatic requires relying on whatever habits you have built without further adjusting or fiddling. If they are sound, fine. If they are not, you'll know it soon enough, but there's no fixing them while you are in the process of play. That would be like trying to learn to drive in the middle of the Indy 500.

Pre-shot is all about giving effective commands for what you want to do with the upcoming shot. What goes into pre-shot is any combination of directions that pertain to that shot. Since it is doubtful that one will have two shots in a round exactly alike, pre-shot will be variable on every shot as well. Pre-shot "wrapping" may not change, but what's contained in that "wrapping" will be different every time.

If you should feel tense as you engage your pre-shot, you will need a means to release that. Tension is physiological, so a physical action is required to relieve it. As the last thing to do, before starting your clear key, over grip-your club, take in a short breath through your nose and hold both for about a second and half. Then release both, start your clear key and walk to set up and re-grip normally. The clear key is a psychological manager and will prevent the return, but it won't remove pre-existing tension, which requires the physiological remedy. So to be clear, we need all the right moves in the right order and under the right circumstances. This is no time for mix and match.